

9-1-1955

Ventures in Education

Frederick I. Kuhns

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kuhns, Frederick I. "Ventures in Education." *The Palimpsest* 36 (1955), 374-382.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol36/iss9/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Ventures in Education

Every opening of the Holy Bible by an Iowa Baptist has reference to the quality of morality attested on its every page. Greater emphasis upon biblical instruction, the rediscovery of the basic principles of Christianity, and personal commitment to Christ are prime objectives of Baptist education.

In Iowa Baptist summer camps for youth, families, and special conferences these very things are being accomplished. All Iowa Baptists either have such camps and assembly grounds already or will soon be building them. For the American Baptists there are two: Iowa Falls Assembly, incorporated in 1897, and Forest Lake, near Ottumwa, also close by the Mars Hill Chapel, Iowa's only surviving log church. In the past ten years more than 11,000 persons have used these camps. Iowa's Regular Baptists and Conservative Baptists also believe in the Christian purposes and opportunities found in religious camp work, and their projects are fast developing, with the former operating a camp on the north shore of Clear Lake. The Jensen Memorial dining hall was opened in 1955.

Early Iowa Baptists desired a college near home. Once upon a time they had five prominent

colleges and academies contributing greatly to Iowa's basic education, but today they have none on Iowa soil. Closest to their interests in 1955 is Sioux Falls College at Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Four Iowans are trustees: Rev. Paul Smith and Rev. Victor O. Wik, both of Des Moines; Rev. Harold B. Bjornson of Waterloo, and Dr. George T. Edds of Fort Dodge.

Building a college was "a subject of vast importance," one that in 1844 urged itself with the force of "a duty" upon the General Association. Two years later, Rev. M. J. Post was made chairman of a committee looking toward an Iowa Baptist Education Society. Agency City in Wapello County was thought "an eligible point." Organized in 1847, the Education Society had as its first president, Joseph T. Fales of Iowa City. In 1851 a committee was appointed on the establishment of a Baptist theological school for the Northwest, jointly with other states. Later, a call was issued for an "educational convention."

Burlington University

This convention was held at Iowa City on April 13-14, 1852, with 19 delegates present. Rev. J. A. Nash preached from the text: "Ye are the light of the world," Matthew 5:14. Fort Des Moines, Pella, Mount Pleasant, New London, Burlington, Wapello, Davenport, and Le Claire all wanted

the college. Burlington won out with seven acres of land and financial subscriptions.

On July 4, 1853, the cornerstone of Burlington University was laid. The building was to be constructed of brick, 60 x 90 feet in plan, and three stories high. Rev. George W. Gunnison was chosen as the first principal, and Mrs. M. A. P. Darwin as lady principal. School opened on January 4, 1854, with 90 students, and before the year had closed the new building was in use.

Colonel Alonzo Abernethy stated that from 1857 to 1861 Burlington University was maintained perhaps more adequately than during any other four-year period. In 1857 John E. Clough matriculated while Rev. Lorenzo B. Allen was the principal. Rev. George J. Johnson, the local Baptist minister, was ever the University's true friend.

The Panic of 1857, the collapse of the currency, the Civil War, and lowered endowment giving dealt roughly with the University. In 1864 its title was changed to Burlington Collegiate Institute, but divisions among Iowa Baptists retarded its development. Difficulties multiplied, and the Institute suspended in 1889 for three years, for such reasons as "changes in the times," "public schools," and "crushing taxation," the last being assessments levied for sewer, curbing, and street paving. Reopening in 1892, the Institute held on for a while though staggering beneath heavy financial burdens, a load which proved too much

at last when the trustees ordered it closed in 1901.

Cedar Valley Seminary

The Cedar Valley Seminary was founded at Osage in 1862, opening on January 12, 1863. Rev. Alva Bush was largely responsible for its beginnings, and during the first ten years 625 boys and girls were enrolled in this academy. In 1881, Colonel Alonzo Abernethy assumed its management, carrying it forward, with large numbers in attendance, until 1902. One of its distinguished alumni (1881) was the late Hamlin Garland, author of *Boy Life on the Prairie*, *The Trail Makers*, and other widely read novels and dramas. Under George M. Potter's administration from 1905 to 1911 things looked bright, but the last dozen years of the seminary's life saw less need for the small private school, and when it was closed in 1922 its property was transferred to the citizens of Osage.

Sac City Institute

Iowa Baptists also supported the Sac City Institute, founded in 1891. Rev. J. D. Collins believed Sac City a good place for an academy, and the Iowa Baptist Convention, sharing his belief, took it under its wings in 1894. School opened the same year under Rev. H. C. Nash with an enrollment of 106. In 1902, with George W. Lee as principal, enrollment rose to 151, but like so many others Sac City Institute had to be closed in 1912 when only 30 students returned that au-

tumn. The growth of the secondary schools was killing off the church-related academies.

Central University

The result of the educational convention in 1852 — the establishment of Burlington University — did not please many Iowa Baptists. This became evident in the state convention meeting the following September, and a resolution was passed in opposition. Another "educational meeting" was held on the spot, and a call issued for another convention. This was held at Oskaloosa on November 10, 1852, but the determination upon a site for a college was deemed "inexpedient." A committee was appointed, however, to entertain further propositions, and a call went forth for an adjourned meeting to be held at Pella. This was done on June 2, 1853, and offers were received from Oskaloosa and Pella. Ballots were in favor of the latter. Articles of incorporation and a constitution were drawn up, and a board of thirty trustees was provided for. Rev. Henry P. Scholte, the sturdy leader of the Dutch colony from Holland to Pella scarcely six years before, was now elected president of the Board. Thus began Central University, amid great promise.

In 1854 Rev. Emanuel H. Scarff of Dayton, Ohio, was called as Central's first principal. Miss Julia Tolman of Monticello Seminary, and Caleb Caldwell of Marietta College were called as assis-

tants. A schoolroom was secured, and the University, in reality an academy, was opened on October 8, 1854. At first, only 37 students came, but the year's total reached 122 — 71 boys and 51 girls. By 1856 Central's first building was ready. The following year, Professor Amos N. Currier, destined to become famous in the Classics at the State University of Iowa, joined the faculty, and in 1858 Central's collegiate department was opened.

During the Civil War the young men from Central enlisted almost to a man. Two faculty members also served in the Union armies — A. N. Currier and S. S. Howell. Instruction continued, but to young ladies instead of to gentlemen, and not a day of school was lost. Debts, however, piled higher, reaching \$12,000, but by hard work the administration paid them off in two years. Students were returning from the War, and by June, 1865, enrollment was 222.

Central had many great years and her campus knew some revered names: Rev. Elihu Gunn, Dr. Louis A. Dunn, Rev. Daniel Read, and Dr. John William Bailey in the presidency; J. K. Hornish, a true benefactor; Rev. and Mrs. Ira J. Stoddard, who went out as missionaries to India; Mrs. Anna Howell Clarkson, who wrote *A Beautiful Life* in tribute to her former teacher, Mrs. Stoddard; Kate F. Keables, Martha Firth, and others too numerous to mention.

Perhaps the one thing that most retarded the progress of the College was the division of interest of the Iowa Baptists between Central and Des Moines University. It never became possible to work out a plan to coordinate these two schools, though efforts were made, 1870-1874, and again 1880-1886. Drawn into this controversy, even the American Baptist Education Society could not resolve it, and eventually the Baptists of Iowa lost both institutions.

Although Central still functions today, it has not been a Baptist college since 1916. Originally a colony of hardy Dutchmen, the Pella community has prospered by allegiance to its Reformed principles. This environment was, accordingly, most favorable when, on June 20, 1916, the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America approved a plan which involved the transfer of the college name, charter, grounds, and buildings to the Pella Classis. However, certain of old Central's endowments were to pass to the American Baptist Education Society as sources of student aid. When these and other express conditions had been accepted, Central College went over to the Dutch Reformed communion.

Des Moines University

In 1855 the Iowa Lutheran Synod erected a college in Des Moines. Overtaken by the Panic of 1857 and the Civil War, however, it did not sur-

vive and the Iowa Baptists bought the property. In 1865 articles of incorporation were adopted and a board of trustees was elected, with Rev. J. A. Nash of Des Moines becoming the first president of Des Moines University.

Though this movement "seemed spontaneous," actually the Iowa Baptist Convention had misgivings about it, inasmuch as the two Baptist colleges at Pella and Burlington were struggling for their lives. In the early years at the Des Moines University, Rev. J. A. Nash, Rev. J. F. Childs of Oskaloosa, Rev. D. N. Mason of Cedar Rapids, and Colonel Alonzo Abernethy served as the principals. Several of these gentlemen personally assumed the crushing financial load.

Des Moines University (coeducational) was opened in 1865 and by 1873 enrollment reached 166. In 1888 it was affiliated with the University of Chicago for accreditation. A number of brilliant faculty members held appointments in Des Moines University. In 1903 enrollment was 330.

In 1906, the Iowa Baptist Convention again tried to unite Central College and Des Moines College. The city of Pella was recommended, but sharp division arose while a new building and instructional program was begun at Des Moines. Under Rev. L. D. Osborn this prospered for a time. Following his administration, the older Dano-Norwegian Baptist Theological Seminary (which had been part of the Divinity School of

the University of Chicago) was moved from Morgan Park, Illinois, to Des Moines, and was operating successfully. When Central ceased as a Baptist college in 1916, a new corporation — "Union College of Iowa" — was formed. The old Des Moines property was then sold to the Roman Catholics. Under a plan of joint-tenancy, old Highland Park College, a business institution, and the new Des Moines College now met together on the Highland Park campus, but the students and alumni did not mix well. The Baptist Hundred Million Dollar Movement brought only \$319,000 to Des Moines College, not enough to keep things going. Efforts to get the Northern Baptist Convention to operate the college also failed, and in 1927 it was taken over by the Baptist Bible Union, controlled by Rev. T. T. Shields of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. This step led to increasing dissatisfaction at Des Moines, with the inevitable and tragic result: final closure in 1929.

Iowa Baptist Student Centers

Iowa Baptists today maintain student centers (called "Roger Williams House") at Iowa State College in Ames, at Iowa State Teachers College in Cedar Falls, and at the State University of Iowa in Iowa City. In this way much timely counselling is done, and programs are planned and conducted by the students and the Baptist student ministers and directors.

FREDERICK I. KUHNS